Connecting in the Classroom: Factors Associated with Student Perceptions of Graduate Teaching Assistant Immediacy

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Background
Immediacy is defined as a sense of psychological or physical closeness or proximity between individuals who communicate with each other. Examples of behaviors expected to elicit feelings of immediacy in the classroom include using personal examples, calling on students by their name, using humor, and being available for students. 

The study investigates how behaviors of Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTAs) and perceived similarities between GTAs and students influence student perceptions of immediacy and motivation to learn. Because many GTAs receive little or no training to prepare them for their role as an instructor, they may not be aware of how their behaviors impact student perceptions of immediacy.

GTAs may also have a difficult time implementing immediacy behaviors – like sharing personal stories or employing humor – that could be seen as diminishing their authority. In other words, the assumption is that the more “immediate” behaviors an instructor enacts, the greater the sense of immediacy experienced by his or her students. These immediacy behaviors may not always translate into student perceptions of immediacy. For example, a student may report that their instructor makes frequent eye contact, but the level of immediacy that results from this behavior depends on the nature of the eye contact and the student’s preferences regarding eye contact.

Connecting behaviors to perceptions of immediacy is important, because it allows researchers to understand if immediacy behaviors are actually having the expected and desired effect.

Hypotheses/RQ

H₁: GTAs who enact a higher frequency of immediate behaviors in class will be perceived by students as being higher in immediacy.

H₂: Students who perceive their GTA as similar in attitudes will rate their GTA higher on immediacy.

H₃: There will be a positive relationship between perceived GTA immediacy and student motivation for learning.

RQ₁: Will observed immediacy behaviors of instructors or perceived similarity with instructors affect ratings of immediacy more strongly?

Methods

Observations. Nine GTAs were observed teaching in small introductory communication classes (approx. 22 students) using the observational protocol tool. Immediacy behaviors were counted using the COPUS method in 2-minute increments.

Surveys. 75 undergraduate students completed one 55-item survey with three measures using a 7-point scale.

Perceived Immediacy: cold/warm, unfriendly/friendly, distant/close, unsociable/sociable

Perceived Similarity: the person is like me, the person behaves like me

Motivation to Learn: unmotivated/motivated, uninterested/interested, uninvolved/involved

Results

H₁: The more immediacy behaviors displayed by a GTA, the higher the students rated a GTA’s perceived immediacy.

H₂: Perceived similarity and perceived immediacy were positively correlated.

H₃: There was a positive relationship between perceived GTA immediacy and motivation to learn.

RQ₁: Perceived student similarity affect ratings of immediacy more strongly than observed immediacy behaviors.

Practical Implications

The question facing instructors is how to create immediacy. For beginning instructors looking to establish authority in the classroom, emphasizing similarities with their students may not be the best approach. For GTAs, incorporating immediacy behaviors may be the better route to student engagement.

The observational protocol developed could be used as a set of suggested teaching practices to help instructors focus on specific immediacy behaviors that they can use in their classroom in order to engage and motivate their students. This tool could also be used in GTA training, either as a resource for beginning teachers or as a protocol for observing them in the classroom.